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ATTITUDES
toward
BLINDNESS

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American Foundation for the Blind
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ATTITUDES TOWARD BLINDNESS

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Preface

The American people believe that physically the blind are better off than other people. This concept affects the attitudes of the general public, the blind person who is also going to school, and the person who is not going to school. It is this concept that is the basis of the study of attitudes toward blindness.

The American Foundation for the Blind has been interested in the study of attitudes toward blindness for many years. In 1934, the first study of attitudes toward blindness was conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind. This study was conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind and the University of California. The results of this study were published in 1935. Since that time, the American Foundation for the Blind has been interested in the study of attitudes toward blindness. This study is the first of a series of studies that will be published by the American Foundation for the Blind. The results of this study are published in this pamphlet. The study was conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind and the University of California. The results of this study were published in 1935. Since that time, the American Foundation for the Blind has been interested in the study of attitudes toward blindness. This study is the first of a series of studies that will be published by the American Foundation for the Blind. The results of this study are published in this pamphlet.

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Preface

The average person believes that psychologically the blind are different from other people. This concept affects the attitudes of the sighted toward the blind person who is attempting an integration into the normal life of the community. Is this concept a fallacy? If so, what can be done about it?

The American Foundation for the Blind for several years devoted a major part of its special program at the National Conference of Social Work to an exploration of this matter. Papers were given by persons representing various fields of learning and philosophy. Three of these papers, presented in 1949, 1950, and 1951 by a psychiatrist, a sociologist, and a psychologist, respectively, have been selected for special publication in this pamphlet. The first and the last paper have previously appeared in the *Outlook for the Blind*; the second paper "Some Concepts of Blindness in American Culture," by Dr. Joseph H. Himes, Jr. has been reprinted from *Social Casework*, December, 1950, with the kind permission of the publishers.

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Motivation of Attitudes Toward Blindness

GERHARD SCHAUER, M.D.

While there are increasing numbers of blind people successfully adjusted to home and occupation, scope and intensity of adjustment of the blind to society and of society to the blind could be broadened if deeply set emotional obstacles within the blind as well as the seeing could be further recognized and accepted. It is recognized that there are emotional obstacles within the blind which are related to their attitude toward blindness, but this paper makes no attempt to deal with that side of the problem.

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to investigate from the point of view of the psychiatrist the more deeply set motivations of attitudes which co-determine behavior toward blindness.

A frequent observation in the field of vocational placement of blind workers are frictions and difficulties in the interaction between blind and seeing personnel which were inconsistent with the apparent adequate adjustment to the work situation on the part of the blind worker, as well as with the apparent understanding and informed acceptance of the blind worker by his seeing colleagues and superiors. This observation has prompted those concerned with the adjustment of the blind to home, school, occupation, and society at large to wonder whether unconscious motivations determining the attitudes toward blindness and toward the blind may be in conflict with the overt and conscious motivations.

The approach taken is one of deduction from accepted psychiatric observation and interpretation, rather than one of case studies

of interpersonal pathology between blind and seeing people. It will also be limited to the intrapsychic or fantasy aspects of behavior. This approach may be formulated in the following manner: "If there are any unconscious or primitive attitudes among seeing people toward blind people, they are probably motivated in the seeing person's attitude toward himself and toward his own vision." Without attempting to justify this consideration, we can draw on several sources which have been utilized by psychiatrists for the exploration of what vision and its loss means to the seeing.

One such source is verbal tradition in the form of proverbial sayings, mythology, and religion. This verbal tradition, on the one hand, represents the fantasy creations of peoples; on the other, it shapes the fantasy life of succeeding generations.

We hit on certain primitive fantasies in the form of sayings and fairy tales in which seeing is equated with eating, or devouring,¹ "eating some object up with one's eyes" (Little Red Riding Hood, and other fairy tales). The common factor in these fantasies is the use of the eye as if it were completely in the service of the mouth. Some external object is incorporated with the eye, or the person identifies himself with what he sees (whether this be actual food, a drama on the stage, a book, or "the truth"). This implies also, that the person who looks is endowed with destructive and omnipotent faculties—and, in reverse, that the person who cannot see is deprived of these powers.

Another set of myths and verbal traditions deals with vision and seeing as something forbidden and forbidding. In magic, the eye or the glance, is used as a sadistic weapon; the basilisk's eye, the hypnotist's and the snake's eye immobilize. The "evil eye" renders you, similarly, helpless and exposed to evil. In these fantasies, vision and looking are dealt with in the sense of gaining absolute power over the thing looked at, of fixing the object with a look and of making the object behave like the looker wishes it to. In the fantasy life of peoples and individuals, to look at an object means to "grow like it," (to be forced to imitate it, and, conversely, to force it to grow like oneself).

¹ Fenichel, Otto. "The Scotophilic Instinct and Identification." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 18, 1937. pp. 6-34.

Still a third category of verbal tradition which might interest us here deals with vision, or better, with loss of vision as a specific punishment for sins committed,² whether knowingly or unknowingly. We speak of "blinding sights" with reference to experiences which stir us up in forbidden ways (either forbiddingly attractive, or forbiddingly repulsive). An outstanding example is the Oedipus myth in which Oedipus blinded himself after learning that he had committed a horrible crime, namely, incest. The biblical example of Lot's wife punishes looking back at God's angry dealing with sinful Sodom and Gomorrah with petrification. In Samson and Delilah blindness appears the consequence and, perhaps, punishment for exogamy and loss of physical strength at the hands of a woman. An old Hebrew tradition forbids the congregation to look at the priest while he gives the blessing on penalty of blindness. Another source from which we may learn something about seeing people's fantasies regarding their vision are the psychiatric patients with disturbances of vision.

In partial, or complete hysterical blindness, the patient has lost the power to see, without, apparently, suffering from a physical disturbance of his visual apparatus. This occurs often after traumatic experiences of sudden shock, or when unacceptable impulses are stirred up. Fantasies around the visual function are often: "I cannot see because it is not right for me to see," or "because it is dangerous for me to see"; "If I do not see, others cannot see me, and they cannot make demands on me."

Another pathological way of dealing with the visual function we find in "peeping": here, vision is utilized by adults in the service of immature sexual curiosity. Frequent fantasies associated with "peeping" and similar disturbances are: arousing the other person sexually; being like the other person; being thrilled at doing something forbidden, etc. A symptom found, occasionally, among obsessive neurotics is an inability to look. The patient wishes to look, but has to avert his gaze, and instead makes use of his other senses. As can be seen, these disturbances of vision are methods the patient adopts in dealing with some of his needs

² Freud, Sigmund. *Psychogenic Visual Disturbances According to Psychoanalytic Conceptions*. Collected Papers, Vol. II.

(self-preservation, sexual) in the face of real or fantasied dangers.

It is also apparent from these illustrations that we associate notions of morality, "good and bad," with the impulses which are expressed through visual channels; it is not only not right (in the sense of immoral), for instance, for an adult to be a "peeping Tom," or to blind his vision to what business he has on hand; we also designate his attitude as "immature" and "childish."

There seems to be a similarity between the attitude toward psychiatric illness found among patients, as well as the public, and that toward other illness, including blindness; namely, the ill or handicapped person is dealt with often in terms of a moral problem, or in terms of not being a grown-up person.

As a last step, it might be worthwhile to attempt to trace this notion of "immaturity" and "childishness" in dealing with vision to the place where it belongs in the development of the individual person.

Our most "childish" and "immature" time in life, infancy, is characterized by extreme helplessness and complete dependency on parental figures. The infant's most effective method to deal with the environment for satisfaction of his needs is touch by skin and mouth, especially sucking. Vision appears to be a background function at this stage. Absence of vision is hardly noticeable. Somewhat later, vision similar to the other functions becomes subservient to the need of reality testing, i.e., to differentiate between friendly and dangerous surroundings. From then on, the "primitive" seeing is relegated to "primitive" fantasy activities for which there is little space and tolerance in later life. At this stage the child is in the process of learning to acquire muscular control over locomotion, speech, and body functions. He develops a great inquisitiveness toward everything connected with his body and his environment. He desires to look at himself and others; he wishes to be looked at and he has a great need to show what he accomplishes.

Vision around that time enters into the service of emulation of adults and older siblings. The child "looks up" to the older person in order to imitate him, "to grow like him," and also to learn the "right way" of doing things and behaving from the "wrong way," by conforming to the demands of the older person.

Depending on the parental philosophy of training, it is also around that time that the child acquires the emotions of shame and disgust. In shame, he averts his gaze, in the magical hope that by not looking, he will not be looked at. Character traits like shyness and exhibitionistic tendencies also have their origin in how the impulse to see and the need to be seen are dealt with by the child and his surroundings (approximately between the third and fifth year of life).

From this sketchy developmental outline, we may try to reconstruct some of the overt attitudes toward the blind.

1. A very primitive attitude of "blind," unfeeling curiosity devoid of restraint, as can be seen in children and mental defectives.
2. An attitude of fear to look at the strange sight because it is "not right" to look, as it might hurt the person looked at, resulting in avoidance.
3. An attitude to feel one with the blind person; to lose one's identity; to become about blind oneself, out of uncritical empathy, resulting in overindulgence.

Reactions to such attitudes directed to oneself and to the other person may be fear, shame, disgust, hostility, guilt of various forms, and also emotions of pity and a compulsive need to help, or to avoid help.

All these attitudes are developmental, i.e., inherent in the development of the maturing person and they are, to varying degrees, self-centered. At this point we may ask, "Why are seeing people stirred up, particularly, by those who have lost their vision?" Is it because we unconsciously think of them as sinners? Is it because we consider vision as a faculty invested with magic power, so that those who are robbed of it become, therefore, degraded?

In conclusion, we may ask what, in our dealings with the blind person, may stir up all these emotions and fantasies resulting in our overt attitudes.³ We may be impressed by varying degrees of helplessness resulting from limitations in reality testing; there may be a greater dependence on others with resultant feelings of weak-

³ Cutsforth, T. D. *The Blind in School and Society: A psychological study*. American Foundation for the Blind, 1951. New ed.

ness, fear of abandonment and reactions of anger and depression; we may find a greater reliance on fantasy out of need to be on equal terms with the seeing world; we may be impressed by a feeling of smallness, of being looked down upon, of feeling observed. And, very often, we may be embarrassedly surprised to find self-assurance and social, as well as economic resourcefulness in a person when we would rather expect otherwise because of the handicap.⁴

A study of the history of the blind⁵ in their relation to a seeing world shows that, with decreasing fears and superstitions on the part of the seeing, the blind person's usefulness to himself and to others rises in multiple proportion. The strength required for this goal can only be attained by the person without sight if his emotional, social, and cultural maturation is promoted by the seeing world he lives in. To that end, greater awareness of our own unconscious fears and needs will lead to greater awareness of the needs of the other person.

Some Concepts of Blindness in American Culture

JOSEPH S. HIMES, JR., PH.D.

Three major factors control the social adjustment of physically disabled persons in our society. The first is the character and extent of the specific physical disability. The second is the socially and culturally defined reactions to the disabled person. The third is the conception of self and the consequent feelings and behavior of the

⁴ Chevigny, Hector. *My Eyes Have a Cold Nose*. Yale University Press, 1947.

⁵ French, Richard S. *From Homer to Helen Keller: A Social and Educational Study of the Blind*. American Foundation for the Blind, 1932.

physically disabled person as these are conditioned by his disability and the social reaction to him.

CHARACTER AND EXTENT OF DISABILITY

Although disability may result from injury or defect in any part of the total human organism, in terms of social disabling character such conditions are generally of three major types: (1) organic—circulatory, respiratory, and central nervous system; (2) sensory—eyes and ears; and (3) structural—limbs, or other muscular-skeletal conditions.

These categories of disabilities restrict the overt social behavior of the individual. That is, they impede the ability of the disabled person to perform certain acts as they are customarily performed in society, and thus render him incapable of behaving according to the normal expectancies. However, behavior limitations imposed by physical disability are restricted primarily to those areas of activity in which the disabled organ or member is essential to full, normal performance. The disability may impose no similar limitation in those other areas of behavior which depend on unimpaired members or organs of the body for normal performance of the social and cultural expectancies.

REACTIONS TO THE DISABLED PERSON

The second factor tending to control the social adjustment of the physically disabled person is the socially and culturally defined reactions to him together with the consequent effects of such reactions upon his personality. These crystallized group reactions may be of two general kinds. The first type admits the behavior limitation of the person and allows for the necessary adjustment to this limitation for him to carry on social intercourse. This pattern of reaction regards the disabled person as capable of normal social behavior in areas not directly affected by the physical impairment. This pattern of social reaction to the physically disabled is objective and desirable. It is, however, not widespread in our society.

The second crystallized pattern of reaction rests on the device of social stereotyping. The tendency here is to respond to a total personality. The handicapping character of the physical disability

is thought to be diffused throughout the total personality and behavior system of the person. On the basis of this one observable fact a presumably consistent totality is constructed. Social behavior thus becomes a response to the total person who is identified and classified by reference to the readily observed physical disability. Reaction to the physically disabled person thus appears reasonably compatible with the recognized disability which serves as a key or clue to his total personality.

Such pictures or constructs come to have common currency and enter into the context of our culture. They are formed of a combination of direct experience and socially acquired information and attitudes. They contain both fact and fancy, products of imagination and resultants of experience. They include culturally defined pictures of the disabled person, standard definitions of social situations, and the socially acceptable ways of reacting toward such a person. Although this pattern of reaction toward the physically disabled is generally undesirable, it appears to be widespread.

Such socially defined constructs and attitude patterns are part of the culture of the group or society that practices them. They exist in the habitual and persistent modes of behavior exhibited by the members of the group or society. They have no intrinsic existence and must, therefore, be deduced by observing the behavior of the members of the group or society in question. As elements of culture, such socially defined constructs and attitude patterns are acquired, in large measure, through the normal processes of socialization. In one important sense, acquiring the cultural constructs and standard attitudes toward the physically disabled is part of the business of growing up in American society.

As a consequence of their cultural nature, these standardized reactions toward the physically disabled tend to vary in both time and space. Within a given group or society they are observed to alter with the passage of time and as the result of common experience and social change. These cultural constructs also tend to vary from group to group and from place to place within our general society. This fact of variability constitutes a real basis for hope of improvement and the key to social planning for effective

alteration of the position of the physically disabled in our population.

In our society, the tendency to create cultural constructs of persons and groups and to react to these symbols as though they were real persons is a normal process. The very size, heterogeneity, instability, and dynamic change of our society make this tendency well nigh inevitable. Many such constructs are part of our common culture and serve us well in daily experience. In the kaleidoscopic panorama of life in a metropolitan area we are able to react automatically, and somewhat efficiently, to the legion of daily contacts only by means of these cultural constructs. In this way we are able to deal with communists, policemen, Jews, store clerks, Negroes, elevator operators, Catholics, subway crowds, theater audiences, bargain-day crowds, and the myriad of other persons that flow through the experiences of a single day. We respond to the person as a picture, a construct, a symbol, which classifies him, defines the nature of the social situation involving him, and prescribes the proper behavior in all such social situations.

But it will be readily recognized that these cultural constructs are frequently false leads, sometimes shockingly false. They tend to erect a total personality structure and a whole system of social relationships on the basis of a single readily observable physical or cultural trait. We employ them like a Procrustean bed, forcing all persons who wear the identifying label into the rigid, stereotyped mold. We then react to the cultural construct, assuming tacitly that the person conforms to it. Although this process of social relationships facilitates the rapid, staccato behavior of American society, it renders social intercourse pathologically superficial and impersonal. Moreover, this process of interaction does grave social injury to the persons and groups who are stereotyped. This is especially true of those persons and groups whose physical label of distinction is so permanent as to permit them no escape, not even segmentally, from the cultural constructs. Such is the experience of Orientals, Negroes, and persons with permanent physical disabilities. Other people may alter their occupations, change their language or religion, or adopt a different political or economic ideology and escape the thwarting effect of the social dogmas.

ONE SET OF CONSTRUCTS

From the social definitions prevalent in our society, it is possible to piece together three fairly consistent cultural constructs of the blind. Let us call them the "blind beggar," the "blind genius," and the superstition of sensory compensation. Probably no one entertains any one picture in its entirety, and certainly no blind person conforms completely to any one. Yet they persist as dynamic elements in our cultural heritage and tend more or less directly to control the behavior of millions of Americans in their relations with the blind.

The "blind beggar" is usually pictured as a man of middle age or older. He shuffles about on cautious feet, soliciting small gifts of money from the passers-by on city streets. He wears a bowed head above stooped shoulders as though weary from the uneven struggle of life. Restless, groping hands remain ever alert to dart forth in exploration or defense. The "blind beggar's" face wears a characteristic expression, an odd combination of watchfulness, woe-begone sadness, and inward musing. His voice is a plaintive sound—croaking, whining, timid.

The picture of the "blind beggar" always includes standard and appropriate equipment. His shuffling, timid feet are guided by the staccato tapping of the metal tip of his white cane. In his hand the familiar tin cup moves spasmodically with the thin metallic sound of a few symbolic coins. Always the "blind beggar" wears dark glasses. Occasionally the picture contains other pieces of equipment. These may include such small musical instruments as an accordion, banjo, or guitar. Sometimes begging is supplemented by the sale of shoe laces, razor blades, and the like. In spite of the sensational exposés of ownership of swank suburban homes, sleek black limousines, and liveried chauffeurs, the picture of the "blind beggar" in our culture includes shabby clothing.

Behind this visible symbol is the assumption of a personality structure and a way of life. This is the picture of a cautious, timid, defeated man. With the cards stacked against him from the outset and whipped daily by life in a world of seeing people, he has retired from the struggle and surrendered to useless dependency. He, like his more fortunate fellows, has accepted blindness as an

affliction, although, having lived with it longer, he may have become more philosophical about it.

Frequently the picture implies that the "blind beggar" is both stupid and ignorant. Certainly the picture suggests that he is incapable of socially useful activity. He knows no useful vocation, trade, or profession. Indeed, as a blind person, he is not expected to know one. He is seen to live suspended in a web of almost total dependence on the generosity of his fellows. If this web breaks, if his fellows withdraw their gratuitous generosity, he falls back on his own resources and must therefore suffer.

But the construct implies that the life of the blind, beggars included, is not altogether empty. They live in a rich inner world peopled by creations of their imagination. With them it is, as a newspaper reporter once wrote of a successful blind college student, "the mind that sees." The "blind beggar" is thought to have retired from the external scene to the rich, varied world of his mind and imagination. This is conceived as a fascinating, mysterious realm apart from the hard realities of the external world. The "blind beggar" emerges from it only long enough to solicit the necessities of his simple meager existence and retires gratefully once the sordid business of the day is done.

The second cultural construct, the "blind genius," is usually not so distinct and consistent. It is, therefore, more difficult to piece the fragments together into a neatly describable picture. Yet the elements persist in our culture and exercise a powerful influence over the behavior of many persons. We need to recognize this.

The "blind genius" is clearly a blind person. He cannot see, or sees so imperfectly that this fact limits normal performance of some social expectancies. Yet in other respects he seldom looks like a blind person. His head is not bowed, his knees are not bent, nor are his shoulders characteristically stooped. He does not wear dark glasses, carry a cane, or shuffle when he walks. In other words, he is generally characterized by absence of most of the traditional symbols of blindness. He is thus not symbolically distinguishable from other people. This fact alone tends to suggest the extraordinary quality of his talents and the unique character of his personality.

But the distinguishing feature of the "blind genius" type is average or superior performance in an area of activity normally presumed to be impossible for blind persons. He may be a superior college student, a talented musician, a successful lawyer. He may be a college professor, a senator, or a county judge. More significantly, he may be a successful person in some field of endeavor where no other blind person has ever served. His performance is regarded as not just good or superior, but rather as extraordinary or superlative. It is assumed that he must possess some special and esoteric resources of insight, talent, or genius, distinct from those possessed by his fellows. Frequently, his ability is assumed to be equally outstanding in all fields of human activity, for clearly it must flow from genius, not from development and exploitation of normal capacities and talents.

It will be readily seen that the "blind genius" construct is a particularizing, not a generalizing, device. That is, whereas the "blind beggar" pattern is a construct into which all blind persons are fitted automatically in order to facilitate and implement reaction to them, the "blind genius" type singles the person out for special consideration. Its effect is to define the person as unique, extraordinary, and therefore different from other blind persons. This is the exception that proves the rule. Assumed facts and definitions of situations relating to the blind as a whole are inapplicable in his case. Another set of facts and definitions must be assumed. The "blind genius" in American culture is a product of the Horatio Alger complex, a creation of the journalistic success story.

American culture also contains a variety of superstitious beliefs about the blind. Perhaps the most widespread is the notion of sensory compensation; that is, that loss of vision is organically compensated by increased acuteness of the other major senses. Blind persons are thought to have greater powers of hearing, touch, and smell than people with normal vision. The belief seems to assume an absolute increase of sensory power resulting from changes of the structure and function of the organs in question.

One interesting variation of this superstition is the folk belief that blind persons possess certain magical powers. Sometimes this belief takes the form of imagined ability to cure various ailments

and miseries. Again it appears as faith in the blind to bring good luck or to reverse a run of bad luck. Sometimes it is claimed that blind persons have power to exercise strange psychic influence over other persons. It is also believed at times that blind persons possess special shrewdness and acumen in personal and business dealings, thus safeguarding them from fraud and exploitation.

SOME EFFECTS OF THE CONSTRUCTS

Although it is possible to present many other illustrations of the tendency to develop interpretative cultural constructs around the single distinguishing feature of blindness, the foregoing should be adequate for our present purpose. It would seem worth while at this point to turn to an analysis of some effects of these cultural constructs on the social behavior of the American people. It is possible to distinguish three types of influences exercised by these cultural mechanisms on social reactions to the blind. First, they constitute interpretations of the meaning of blindness and the nature of the personalities of blind persons. Second, they define the character of social situations involving relations with blind persons. Third, they provide devices of social control for both the seeing and the sightless and thus constitute a comprehensible base for predicting behavior in certain social situations.

Few people have ever been blind and later regained their sight, although, thanks to modern medical science, the number of such persons is increasing. As a consequence, most people have no way of penetrating the inner meaning and experience of blindness directly. Neither can they understand directly the organization of a personality in which one element of reality is blindness. Yet, for most Americans, the existence of blindness is part of the reality of their lives. They are naturally curious about the meaning of blindness and the personality of blind people. In this situation they require some device for permitting them to deal meaningfully with the fact of blindness in their social experience. It is not possible to avoid this aspect of human social experience. Most people have neither the time nor the opportunity to understand it.

The standard conceptions of blindness in our culture are the key to this problem. They provide an interpretation of the mean-

ing of blindness. It is, to be sure, a strange and mysterious meaning but it is credible in a world of strange, mysterious phenomena. These constructs also provide consistent conceptions of the personality organization of the blind. Thus, they make sense and are useful, not because they present an accurate picture of the meaning of blindness and the personality of blind people, but rather because they are consistent and compatible with the general cultural context. The strangeness is normal and comprehensible, and no more bewildering than many other features of the crazy mosaic of our society. The average person is able to take the fact of blindness in his stride, for it has meaning and consistency with the total context of his culture.

Cultural constructs of the blind contain definitions of social situations. They prescribe a mode of contact and communication consistent with the assumed powers and limitations of blind persons. In a sense, certain kinds of sensory communication are declared to be "off limits." Contact and communication are to be effected through culturally approved channels. Since these are generally different from the normal patterns of contact and communications we are likely to observe a certain fumbling as people attempt to adjust to the required communication behavior. Another effect is over-communication or under-communication; this is evident when people shout at blind persons because they cannot see, or when solicitous friends explain the obvious in weary detail.

Standard concepts of blindness in our culture generally assign to sighted persons the dominant position in social situations. That is, the definition of the situation implicit in the cultural construct relegates the blind person to inferior social status. Automatically, the cultural mechanisms of behavior indicate the proper status relationship between blind and sighted persons in social situations. One consequence of this practice is compensatory aggression on the part of the blind in an effort to equalize the status relationship.

Such a definition of status relationships in normal social situations tends to eliminate blind persons from routine competition and conflict with sighted people. Competition with the blind is, in a sense, ruled as "off limits." This fact is evidenced by the cultural taboo against cheating or defrauding the blind. This practice

protects blind persons from much of the harsh struggle in American society. As such it is doubtless an expression of group generosity and sympathy. But by the same token blind persons are rendered largely ineligible to compete for the objects and activities that carry high social value in our culture. Clearly, this practice severely limits the range of behavior regularly permitted to the blind.

The net social effect of this standard definition of situations is to define normal reactions to the blind as relations with a social inferior. The results are the downward-flowing patterns of reaction manifested in pity, sympathy, and generosity. Blind persons frequently resent these reactions as "patronizing." Such behavior exercises a powerful influence in the blind person's conception of self and social roles. It is this fact perhaps more than any other element of the social situation that is most demoralizing to the blind person and most damaging to his morale. It means that he enters the struggle with both a physical and a social strike against him.

We have already indicated some of the forms of social behavior required by the cultural definitions of blindness. A few additional remarks will suffice at this point. The cultural constructs delineate fairly specifically the way one should act in normal intercourse with blind persons. Someone with normal vision should help blind persons across busy city streets, open doors for them, proffer them money or material assistance, give them a seat on bus or subway. By the same token, blind persons are expected to accept these gestures of sympathy and kindness with expressions of genuine gratitude. To behave in any other manner in the indicated situations is both improper and ungenerous.

The cultural constructs regard some activities as "off limits," and define certain behavior as impossible for blind persons. Violations of this behavior code are discouraged and even prohibited. The executive of a large organization reviewed the training and experience of a blind applicant for a routine professional position. The record contained detailed evidence of successful practice following outstanding academic preparation. The executive, however, refused to consider the applicant, asserting that he was incapable of successful performance in the very area where his suc-

cess had been most noteworthy. Another case in point is the experience of a blind man who stopped at the ticket window of a metropolitan station to pick up a train reservation. When he asked for upper four, the agent was incredulous. "How will you get in and out of there?" he demanded, and proceeded to secure a lower berth as a special consideration. The executive and the ticket agent, like most people, conformed to the cultural expectations. They regarded deviations as not only improper, but risky as well. The cultural conception of proper behavior for the blind tends to force them into a narrow, categoric range of approved activities. Thus, by an odd twist of events, both the blind and the seeing are, in a sense, trapped by the standard mechanisms of our culture.

Conformity to this social code is rewarded quite as surely as violations are prohibited. The disparaging remarks, the meaningful looks, and the frosty frowns that follow the person who ignores the code are familiar experiences for all of us. The taboo against cheating, abusing, or otherwise defrauding blind persons is further evidence of the social pressure for conformity. To the reward of social approval for conformity is added the further compensation of an inward sense of satisfaction for having done the magnanimous and decent thing.

In so far as these cultural mechanisms of behavior regulate social relationships, they constitute bases of social prediction. It is possible to anticipate what should be done in a future situation and to count on understandable behavior from the other participants. They infuse some sense of order into social situations that contain a somewhat mysterious and incomprehensible element. Rapid automatic responses are possible on the basis of the standardization of the situation. That this process of standardization and prediction distorts personality and inhibits potentially useful behavior does not detract from its efficiency as an instrument of social behavior. With all their faults, current conceptions of blindness in American culture are useful and necessary devices of normal social intercourse.

SUMMARY

We may observe that the dynamic, heterogeneous, and complex character of American society tends to facilitate the process of

stereotyping divergent elements of the population for purposes of social relations. While some of these cultural constructs present a faithful picture of the social subject, more frequently they simplify and distort the person or group. Among many conceptions of the blind which constitute part of the American cultural heritage, three typical illustrations can be distinguished and described with some accuracy. They are the "blind beggar," the "blind genius," and the belief of sensory compensation.

Cultural mechanisms like these have at least three important social effects. They interpret the meaning of blindness and the personality of the blind; they define standard social situations; and they control social behavior, thus rendering it orderly and predictable. One consequence of this process is the unrealistic, sometimes grotesque character of many social reactions to the blind. Another result is the routine subordination of blind persons and restriction of their behavior potentials with attendant injuries to morale, conception of self, and effectiveness of social roles.

The important role of casework therapy in this situation seems clearly indicated. It is essential to arrest and forestall the damaging of personalities in their formation. It is important, moreover, to salvage and restore twisted and injured personalities to as large a measure of normality and social usefulness as possible. But in the kind of cultural and social situation in which the blind of our society must live and develop, there are limitations to what can be achieved through casework. In this situation, it would seem desirable to supplement and support casework treatment by a broad approach designed to alter the conceptions of blindness in our culture.

Investigations in anthropology, sociology, and social psychology have demonstrated not only that culture changes continuously, but that it is amenable to deliberate change. Further, these investigations have revealed the dynamic principles underlying the formation and change of culture. Practitioners in such fields as advertising, politics, government, industry, and organized labor have utilized the science of culture in practical situations. It would appear reasonable to assert that scientific data and this practical experience should provide a basis for an approach to the problem

of changing some of the prevalent conceptions of blindness in our culture. The first phase of such a program will clearly be a thorough investigation of the extent, source, nature, and effects of the prevailing conceptions in American culture. In such research the foregoing discussion must be regarded merely as hypothesis. On the basis of the conclusions of such research, a carefully planned program of action should be constructed. Although specific objectives of such a program must grow out of research, perhaps we all can agree in advance on certain basic goals. Perhaps we should not ever hope for completely rational and objective conceptions of blind persons in a society so complex, dynamic, and heterogeneous as ours, but at least we may look forward to the day when cultural conceptions will in general conform more faithfully to the abundantly documented fact of the nature of blindness and the behavior possibilities of the blind.

The Psychological Roots of Attitudes Toward the Blind

SYDELL BRAVERMAN

In January of this year, prominent newspaper space was given to the story of a four-year-old girl in Georgia whose parents had to decide between having the child's eye removed and having her die of cancer. The story was carried for days on end, while the parents prayed for guidance in making their decision. It was almost like a soap opera, with the newspaper accounts all but telling us to buy the paper next day to find out whether the parents were going to let her be blind or dead. At long last, the parents decided to leave

the matter in the hands of God rather than in the hands of surgeons. At this point, in melodramatic, true-to-form soap opera tradition, another hospital stepped in and arrived at the diagnosis of something other than cancer. The last account, at the time of this writing, was that the child's sight was improving.

I cite this story because a whole constellation of beliefs about blindness and resulting attitudes toward blind people are implicit in it, and because the change in diagnosis after the parents had made their decision must have reinforced some of these beliefs in the minds of the newspaper readers of the nation.

It was generally conceded, both in straight news accounts of the incident and in the man-in-the-street's responses to questions of roving reporters, that the decision which the parents had to make—a decision between having their child blind or dead—was indeed a most difficult one. Herein we see striking demonstration of the widespread existence of one of the beliefs about blindness: that it well may be a fate worse than death. If not, why the sympathetic acceptance of the parents' difficulty in arriving at a decision? Even more so, why the acceptance of their decision to forego surgical treatment? We all know how the public generally reacts to stories of children who are denied medical or surgical care because of religious or other convictions of their parents. In this case, the parents had no convictions which precluded the surgical care; they just didn't want to let their child live her life under blindness. And when it was blindness that was the alternative to death, society was not aghast at the decision to choose death. Thus, we become acutely aware of the widespread feeling that blindness is a very special kind of disability which may make life so unbearable that death may be preferable to it.

There is so much incontrovertible evidence among blind people that they do not find their handicap completely incapacitating, and that they do not experience life as anything like a fate worse than death, that one of the basic characteristics of beliefs about blindness becomes immediately apparent: these are beliefs which are held by sighted people about blindness, beliefs to which people who experience blindness do not subscribe. Their attitudes stem from their beliefs, misconceived as these must be, and to investigate

the roots of the attitudes we must look into the sighted man. We must look into his psychological and emotional make-up, for if the beliefs had been held on an intellectual, rational basis they would have been abandoned long ago in view of the overwhelming evidence against them.

The idea of looking into the sighted man to find the bases of the blind man's difficulty in becoming integrated into the environment is not new. Dr. Gerhard Schauer states, "... adjustment of the blind to society and of society to the blind could be broadened if deeply set emotional obstacles within the seeing could be further recognized and accepted." Dr. Joseph S. Himes speaks of certain cultural constructs or stereotypes devised to facilitate social intercourse. He implies, too, that these are devised by the majority group in the culture, as a means of dealing with minority groups.

Let us stop for a moment and examine these constructs. We speak of attitudes of majority groups toward minority groups as prejudices—prejudgments. A minority group is endowed with a certain set of physical, mental, emotional, and moral characteristics, and each member of that group is prejudged on the basis of these imputations. One need only say to the average group of white men, "John Smith is a Negro." Though John Smith is unknown to the white men, they immediately endow him with a whole constellation of characteristics which go far beyond the color of his skin. Before these men meet John Smith, they just know that he is physically strong, mentally subnormal, emotionally labile, and morally loose. Perhaps within the group there are other, or more specific, characteristics imputed to Mr. Smith, but the general reaction is to prejudge the man. The specific characteristics imputed vary with the minority group and, at times, with the culture of the majority group. Constant for each member of every minority group, however, is the existence of a constellation of characteristics which he is prejudged to have. On venturing out of his group into the culture around him, a minority group member is better equipped to make a social adjustment if he knows the nature of the imputations with which he is going to be faced. This does not mean that he must conform to the stereotype; actually, he may venture forth with the express purpose of trying to do his share

toward breaking down that stereotype. But in knowing the nature of the beliefs about him he will be prepared for the reactions manifested toward him and will be able to equip himself for dealing with them.

If we examine attitudes toward blind people, we find that they, too, are prejudged on the four levels of human endowment. On the physical level, the blind man is said to be incapable of doing almost anything at all. Every time a blind man walks down the street he is regarded with awe. The sighted man doesn't quite believe a story about a blind man who can walk across his own living room without upsetting every piece of furniture in his path. And if the sighted man sees such a thing done, it is a conversation piece for all time.

On the mental level, the blind man is thought to have a void which is directly connected with his inability to see. The sighted man, because in his own development he has learned to test reality through vision, assumes that without vision there can be no real grasp of reality. He sees vision as the basis of imagination in that visualization and imagination, he believes, are developed on the basis of information fed to the mind through the eyes. He cannot conceive of imagination fed by other than visual perceptions. If he acknowledges the possibility of an imagination and of visualization fed through other channels, he conceives of it as lacking in reality, for it exists without the necessary quality of comparability with what is actually seen. The next step for him is to conclude that the blind person is without understanding, since, through imagination, visualization and reality testing (all visual to him), man arrives at an understanding of the world about him. Thus, in essence, sighted man confounds vision with understanding. Without imagination, visualization and understanding he had to postulate that there exists in the mind of the blind person a void. Because of this concept of the mental void, blind child education was thought to be miraculous, and its development was seriously impeded. Sighted man could conceive of education of the blind only in terms of filling this void with information which he perceived through his eyes; and how this was done, how visual information was relayed through the other senses, he found difficult

to comprehend. The need to fill this void with visual information was considered so basic that it was not until long after its development that braille was taught in the schools for the blind. It was considered lacking in reality orientation since the dots of braille did not convey to the mind of the blind student an image of the characters of the alphabet as the sighted man knew them. I shall not go into a more complete discussion of the void concept, because I'm sure all of you here are well aware of its existence and rather tired of hearing about it repeatedly. Suffice it to say, that even today, the blind man is prejudged to have either a lack of understanding or at least inadequate understanding of the world in which he lives. It is frequently felt that he lives in a "world of his own." His imagination, if he has one, cannot possibly be reality oriented; it must be pure fantasy.

On the emotional level, the blind man, as indicated before, is thought to be very unhappy. He probably can get no enjoyment whatsoever out of life. At best, his life may be preferable to death only in that no one knows exactly what is in store for us when we die. Beyond the profound melancholy which he must experience constantly in his deplorable state, he is said to have a whole set of feelings which the sighted man cannot possibly comprehend (in spite of the fact that it is the sighted man who imputes them to the blind man). Later we will look further into this imputation of a profound sense of melancholy plus a whole host of strange emotions.

Moral characteristics imputed to the blind vary from culture to culture more than do the characteristics on the other three levels, but each society has its own concepts of the moral endowments of the blind. Where blindness is felt to be a severe form of punishment from on high, the blind man is obviously without proper moral endowment. The very fact that he is blind shows that he has sinned. In our own culture, the moral characteristics are generally more elusive and somewhat varied, but one worker with the blind recently reported that since she took her present job friends have repeatedly approached her to ask if the blind people she met through her work weren't rather sinister characters. Among other groups, though this is less usual, the blind man is endowed with

a saintly nature. Whatever moral characteristics are imputed to him, the blind man must take into account the fact that he is going to be prejudged on the moral level and found "different."

The overwhelming amount of evidence to prove these imputations false has done nothing to change the situation. What is more, and what constitutes a major difference between the blind minority and other minorities, the blind man may take on these characteristics at any time in his life. He need not develop them from infancy; on the contrary, he may have been the exact opposite until the day he became blind. To seek the roots of these attitudes, then, we must try to find out what there is about blindness which causes the sighted man to hold them. Their roots must lie in the meaning and importance which man ascribes to sight, for the inability to see is the only common denominator in the people to whom the characteristics are ascribed.

In our book *The Adjustment of the Blind*, Hector Chevigny and I present and discuss the hypothesis that sighted man's attitudes toward the blind arise from the fact that blindness, or the thought of blindness, mobilizes sighted man's castration fears. There is an overwhelming mass of evidence in the dynamics of personality development, in psychopathology and in mythology to support this view. Freud termed sight a partial instinct in sexual development; that is, at an early stage the child seeks gratification through looking. In normal development, the partial instinct becomes just one of many factors in sexual stimulation, while subsequent gratification is achieved in the normal way. Where parental objections block the infant from obtaining adequate gratification through looking, there is a certain degree of fixation at this stage of development, and looking comes to play a more important role in adult life. In those in whom parental taboos are strong enough to force a serious fixation at this stage, later sexual gratification centers almost completely around looking. It is in this group that we find the scotophiliac, the peeping Tom, the people whom we call perverts. Though there are perverts who have fixated at other stages of development, vision is the only sensory channel in which perversions exist, except to a very minor degree in touch and olfaction where visual imagery also is involved.

Because, in our society, looking is generally objected to by parents, a degree of scopophilia is present in most of us, or if not scopophilia then exhibitionism, the other side of the coin. The pin-up girls, chorus lines, beauty salons, magazine models, ogling "wolves" and such, all attest to this. The sighted man will have castration anxiety aroused by the blind man to the degree to which looking is a vital part of his own sexual apparatus. In the average man in our culture, the sight of, or thought of, blindness will arouse some degree of castration anxiety. The true scopophilic will consider blindness as castrating, as removal of the genitals.

If we look into mythology, we find that the equating of blindness and castration is not simply a product of our modern culture. In the familiar Oedipus legend, the hero inflicted blindness on himself as punishment for incestuous relations with his mother, though he was ignorant of their relationship at the time. The various legends about the blinding of the Greek seer Tiresias all connect his blindness with some sexual taboo. Subsequent history reveals that blinding as a form of punishment inflicted by society was also meted out most commonly as retribution for sins of a sexual nature. Instead of actual castration of the sinner, blinding (symbolic castration), was the punishment inflicted. It was felt to be the most dire form of punishment, in that, while it preserved life, it removed all possibility of joy in life.

In psychopathology we also find evidence of the tendency to equate blindness with castration. The most vivid examples of this are the schizophrenics who seek to pluck out their eyes for fantasied sexual transgressions. Less striking, but none-the-less conclusive, is the more frequent neurotic symptomatology involving the eye or its function of sight in those who cannot accept their sexual impulses and fantasies, or who continue to feel the need for punishment for infantile transgressions.

In light of this hypothesis, we can begin to see meaning behind some of the characteristics imputed to the blind. The profound disbelief in the blind man's ability to function on the physical level, even after he proves himself completely capable of such functioning, is no longer so mysterious. To potent man, sexual impotence is considered the most dire fate he can suffer. The impotent

man is thought to be a mere shell of a man, devoid not only of his sexual power, but of all physical power—bereft of all virility.

On the moral level, the castrated man is portrayed in literature as a sinister character, with thoughts and impulses which the potent man would never entertain. Recently, a friend who works in Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric division told me that they had admitted a patient who had castrated himself during a psychotic episode. On the day following his admission, some of the men on the staff were discussing the patient and their reactions to him. They all admitted that they had felt a strong inner revulsion, a real physical sensation amounting almost to nausea, on confronting the man. Not one of the staff members could find any rational basis for his reaction, yet they all said they just couldn't help feeling distinctly uncomfortable in his presence and feeling some emanation of baseness from the man himself. It is psychologically sound to say that both the baseness attributed to the castrate and their feelings of revulsion arose out of their own castration fears evoked by the sight of him. How similar this is to some of the early records of attitudes toward the blind. It was felt that contact with a blind man would somehow transfer his uncleanness to the sighted man; the blind man, like the leper, was to be thrown a coin, but physical contact, and sometimes even looking at him, were almost forbidden. Today we no longer consider the blind man unclean, we tell ourselves; but how frequently do sighted men experience a physical sensation amounting to revulsion on contact with a blind man, and how similar is their inability to explain it to the inability of the Bellevue staff to explain their reactions to the castrated patient.

If we compare emotions imputed to the blind with emotions imputed to the eunuch, we find a striking similarity. There is the unsmiling face of the eunuch, the host of feeling which the potent man cannot experience and the almost complete lack of normal effect. The potent man has long felt that interpersonal relations with the eunuch must be different from normal interpersonal relations because there is no commonality of feeling between them. This is a different variety of human being, a man who cannot experience things the way others do, who has been deprived of all joy in living, whose emotional reactions are so different from those of

normal men that one does not quite know how to treat him even in the most casual conversation. How different is this from relations between the sighted and the blind?

As intimated above, the imputation of a mental void and restricted intellectual functioning seems to arise from something other than the castration anxiety of the sighted man. Though the castrated man is frequently felt to be mentally subnormal or is endowed with certain abilities for slyness and conniving, as the blind also frequently are, the mental characteristics imputed to the blind seem to arise more from an overestimation of the role of sight in understanding than from the role of sight in sex.

In general, however, we find that most of the attitudes toward the blind and the misconceived beliefs on which those attitudes are based, can be understood in terms of the castration hypothesis. Now let us look at the emotions most commonly experienced by the sighted man with the blind, rather than at the emotions attributed to the blind. If we return to the revulsion felt on contact with the castrate, and the long history of withdrawal from contact with the blind, we begin to see the development of the one feeling most frequently mentioned in attitudes toward the blind—*pity*. How does this pity develop? If the immediate reaction to the castration fears evoked by the blind man is one of revulsion, the impulse that accompanies it is to banish from sight the object which caused this reaction. Because such an impulse, such a desire, is untenable in our society, we experience strong guilt feelings. Accompanying these guilt feelings is anxiety. Because anxiety is painful, we develop ways of keeping ourselves from feeling it and from finding out what untenable impulse caused it. In seeking to free ourselves from the anxiety aroused by thoughts of blindness, we must turn the initial feeling of revulsion into the acceptable feeling of pity. In this way we make a sort of magical gesture of a "good" emotion to pay for the experiencing of a "bad" emotion. We often supplement it by a further magical gesture, in the form of a check, alms, forcing attentions on the object, going to great lengths to let the person know that we feel this overwhelming sense of pity for him. We give him money, we give him food, we arrange entertainment for him in an almost compulsive way.

Kindness, which is manifested toward the blind man all too infrequently, is almost the exact opposite of pity, in that it is a response to the reality situation. Out of kindness comes the kind of help we really need, not the kind of help someone forces upon us in place of what we want. It is easy to recognize that what is done for the blind man out of pity is not what he necessarily feels is the most important thing that could or should be done for him. Rather, it is the thing we feel compelled to do in order to cleanse ourselves, to absolve ourselves from the guilt we experience for having wished to put him out of our sight and out of our minds. Thus, the pity clearly arises not in response to the actual difficulties the man experiences, but out of the feelings he evokes in us. It is a response, not to outward reality, but to inward needs.

We all respond warmly to expressions and acts of kindness, unless certain neurotic needs make us reject all expressions of warmth. But how do we respond to expressions of pity? Who wants to be pitied? Pity places us in a position inferior to that of the one doing the pitying. It implies that we are "being felt sorry for" because we are not of the superior ilk. We feel degraded by pity and almost shout out, "Don't pity me! If you feel kindly toward me, do something to help me, but don't stand there and pity me." Yet failure of the blind man to express gratitude for acts of pity arouses utter fury in the one doing the pitying. That this anger should result is not mysterious, in that the anxiety cannot be allayed until the pity receives expression and recognition.

I believe that castration anxiety is at the root of the pity felt for the blind, but that does not mean that I believe we have to eliminate those feelings from the sighted population in order to improve the lot of the blind population. Much can be done, and done immediately, in the field of social work for the blind. The many letters requesting donations for one blind-aid agency or another are carefully designed to arouse pity. They seek to make the reader so sorry for the blind that he will respond with a big fat check. Perhaps this end justifies the means. But is the immediate goal of raising funds more important than the long-term goal of integration of the blind into society? If so, then let pity be aroused. If there is any hope of approaching the long-term goal, however, evoking pity as a

means of collecting funds is defeating the purpose. Subscribing to the public's feelings of pity; more than that—seeking to evoke those feelings where they may not be too strong—is, in effect, subscribing to the total constellation of attitudes toward the blind and the basic beliefs about blindness. If we encourage people to go on feeling pity, we encourage them to go on feeling that blindness is a fate worse than death, and that blind people are bitterly unhappy, and that blind people are incapable of living independently. We certainly cannot change conditions overnight, but perhaps if we start now we can eventually make the public see that the blind man who is given the opportunity to become rehabilitated physically and economically is the kind of man who is a member of the society in which he lives instead of a member of a minority group which exists as a distinct unit off in a corner of that society.

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